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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the importance of children's early experience and its implications for the future. The paper notes three important societal changes--changes in women's roles, changes in the concept of marriage, and changes in the nature of childhood--and discusses the factors underlying these trends. Current research suggests that the architecture of the brain is more plastic than was previously thought, and windows of opportunity in early learning may be lost or limited if they are not appropriately capitalized upon during early childhood. Noting that children today are least safe in their own homes and most safe in early education and care settings, the paper describes two parent support programs for at-risk parents. The paper describes the immense socializing power of the media as demonstrating the ubiquitous nature of the U.S. culture. Problems with media use are noted, such as the impact of violence and the use of television as a childminder. Implications of these social changes for the child, family, and early education and care are explored: (1) care and education are so interwoven that it makes most sense to see them as thoroughly interdependent; and (2) effective and sensitive parental support must accompany the provision of good institutions. The paper concludes by noting that J. Bowlby's central beliefs in the importance of helping families have not been discredited and that the challenge is to ensure the melding of care and education into a secure profession. Contains 32 references. (KB)

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Childhood and family in the 21st century: Preparing for an unknown future

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"Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion...."
SHAKESPEARE: Troilus and Cressida, Act 3, Scene 3.

It seems to me that there are three things to guard against when reading summaries and syntheses of research. They are the same things one guards against when writing them; selectivity, emotionality and over-simplification.

All of us are selective in the way we view the world. We build on our own experience; we see through our own eyes; we select almost fortuitously. In particular we are massively influenced by our own sex-role perceptions and by our experience in the first years of our lives. As Piaget once said, 'there is no concept without a context'. Gordon Allport once put it succinctly, so I am told, by saying 'you can't have a personality in a desert'. More and more, too, we are begining to understand the emotionality of our reasoning. Writers like Goleman have returned to an issue espoused by Freud and the early psycho-analytic school, but somewhat neglected by cognitive theorists, and shown how thinking is not a purely intellectual act. I especially have to take cognisance of that, because, towards the end of my academic life I recognise that I CARE about the subject of childhood with a passion which is almost indecent. My emotions carry me away and my reasoning is at times less than objective and closer to the 'clinical' and idiosyncratic than I care to admit. Over-simplification is a necessary attribute of any summary. But beware what Chesterton said (and this is particularly true when summarising or interpreting world--wide trends) 'He who simplifies, simply lies'.

"Let it be hoped, then, that all over the world men and women in public life will recognize the relation of mental health to maternal care, and will seize their opportunities for promoting courageous and far-reaching reforms."
(Bowlby, 1965 rev ed, p241)

It is now some fifty years since John Bowlby's influential book, Child Care and the Growth of Love was published. As most of us know, Bowlby thought there was no substitute for mother love and that close parenting was a necessity for a sane adult life and for a cohesive society. Half a century later, whilst we may acknowledge the pioneering work of Bowlby, of Spitz, or of Rutter and others, we are also much more aware that attachment comes in many guises and that still relatively little is known about precisely what it is in our childhood that may make us function for good or ill as adults. We know that some people are surprisingly resilient. We also know that many (perhaps most) are not and that long-term delinquency may be predicted with some accuracy in boys, by the age of three or so (Silva, 1996), though here the interplay between nature and nurture raises serious, as yet, unresolved issues.

There is no doubt that Bowlby in some aspects was misunderstood and (to some extent) used by politicians and others who wished to see segregated roles sustained and women kept at home. But Bowlby's advocacy was much more a focus on the QUALITY of attachment; and his concerns for affectionate parenting were extremely timely and had an immensely positive effect upon many child-care institutions throughout the world. He can, therefore, with a certain amount

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of warmth, be regarded as right on function and (probably) wrong on structures, though, of course, we have the benefit of hindsight; and, as I have said, all ideas have to be considered in their context. Bowlby was an eclectic psychologist. He drew on many aspects of biology and medicine to propound his theories on inter-personal relationships and emotional development. People suffer, he said, from inadequate parenting and we need to be aware of it. And adults do suffer from having been wrongly handled and nurtured, of that there is no doubt; and the timing of key events seems critical. Damage to self-esteem does seem to follow disturbed attachment, and as Holmes (1993) said in his assessment of Bowlby, there is no really good argument against providing high quality care and protection during childhood. Countless longitudinal studies, countless psycho-dynamic accounts, countless criminal lawyers and countless teachers and carers would testify to the wisdom of Bowlby's message!

In 1999, therefore, where are we in our understanding of the importance of early nurture and learning; and what are the implications for the future? Are our children well-provided for, cared for, nurtured with more sympathy and understanding than half a century ago? Are we approaching deeper insight into the nature of child-rearing, the crucial importance of early learning? Can we see a future that secures children so lovingly and appropriately that our own societies benefit and flourish? Do we understand the balance necessary between societal/economic needs and the individual creative forces which make for a humanising culture and can we get that balance right?

This paper attempts to draw upon some 42 years of work in education and care, experience of it in other countries, of having taught young children in a variety of settings and then of melding all those varied (and sometimes conflicting) experiences with my interests as a researcher and psychologist. It also draws upon the research work of the last ten years, especially that facilitated and aided by forms of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and upon our increasing awarenes of biochemical changes in the brain and the burgeoning of neuron-synapse connections in the first year of life.

Taking a broadly ecological view (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), what may we perceive in the countries of OECD (29 richest), in the European Union and (increasingly) in the developing world? Firstly, one would be extremely blind if one did not see within the overall context the long march of women. The second world-war is often cited as a catalyst to the process of gradual emanicipation. But in reality the whole century of rapid social and medical change, the accelerating advance in technology, (especially of communications technology) and the concomitant speed of consciousness-raising, are probably of far greater significance. Add the freedom of choice attributed to the use of more efficient contraception; add the more recent gradual demise of heavy industry and one begins to see how potent is the mix and how inevitable its course. Indeed, many of us (men and women alike) delight in the changes taking place, see the domination of social and political systems by men as a temporary, 'unholy ' and disagreeable feature of certain periods of history. Whilst there are many miles yet to travel and many social systems to understand, ascertain and improve, yet greater equality of the sexes should surely enrich and stabilise this world in a far more fitting manner than any other major political upheaval hitherto. However, within such a crude overview lie many complexities.

Some schools of thought see the socialisation of children as largely the right of the mother and thus any weakening or amelioration of that role as an attack on women's expertise and power; others see the exact opposite and expect men to operate across more dimensions of nurturance than they have traditionally in the past. Still others remind us that the nuclear family is often far from perfect and sometimes a hotbed of crushing emotional mis-management and potentially

lethal psychological modelling. Whatever position one takes (and there are many more), one inevitably returns to the changed roles of women in modern societies and to the fact that mobility, economics and changing needs also have largely destroyed the extended family as well. When one adds the patterns of divorce and the world-wide decline in the birthrate in the (so-called) developed world, one begins to see that early childhood care and education are in need of vital re-assessment,that they may have to be fore-grounded and moved 'centre-stage'. In short child socialization may have to be provided by greater collective responsibility than it has been before. Societal health and cohesion cannot be left simply to the haphazard adoption of market forces or private negotiation; nor will there be any return to those mythical 'family values' so beloved of many policy-makers and politicians!

Secondly, but in reality concomitant with that 'long march' of women towards emancipation, comes the changing concept of marriage itself. In many countries divorce laws have slowly relaxed, religious strictures weakened, tax laws altered and financial penalties been ameliorated. These last have not necessarily always been intended; it has sometimes been more to do with the shift in economic needs, than resulting from direct legislation. But it means that many, many more people are able to contemplate divorce and that many actually act on that contemplation (Currently well over a third of all Australian and British marriages end in divorce. Moreover, in Scandinavian countries there is clear evidence that more children are 'born outside' conventional marriage than within it). Predictions of future patterns are difficult, but it does seem likely that the proportion will go on increasing. Already this means that approximately 40% of British children under ten years or so will have experienced the divorce of their parents by about the turn of the millennium. It means that more children live in lone parent families, cohabiting households or with stepfamilies than previously and this alters the dynamics of relationships as well as the 'traditional' life-style once associated with child-rearing. In short, what has been described as 'serial monogamy' is now a reality for many persons in our societies.

We know that, within the European Union as a whole about 80% of parents with children living with them are currently married, but we can also note the huge variations between countries. For instance, in Sweden and Denmark approximately one in two births take place outside marriage. In the UK and in France, that figure is approximately one in three. (A worrying aspect of British life is the high rate of teenage pregnancy; the highest in Europe. In 1992 3% of all 15 to 18 year olds gave birth; and figures from the previous year note that 83% of British teenage mothers were single (OPCS 1991).) But for countries like Finland, Sweden, or Denmark, with a high rate of extra-marital births, it should be noted that these still take place within relatively long-term, stable cohabiting unions.

Thirdly, we should note that our children are not the same from generation to generation. Children are 'social products'. In many respects they are more mature and more sophisticated than ever before, particularly in relation to technology and to access of social and technological information Indeed, one could, with some justification suggest that children are no longer socialised largely by parents or by siblings, but more often by television. How many children in the 29 OECD countries watch 'The Simpsons' or 'South Park' regularly?. At the same time, in many of the post-industrial countries, the child's access to unsupervised play activities out of doors has markedly diminished. Thus, whilst children are heavier and more physically advanced, they will also be more vulnerable to quite different life stressors from those of their parents. The secular trend in decline of age at menarche ensures that most western girls reach physical maturity by age 12 plus years, or so. This

means that many primary school children will be physically mature; a feature not anticipated by the founders of elementary education one or two centuries ago. Many of our children will also have surprisingly sedentary lives in much of North America, Australia and Europe, such that obesity is a minor but serious issue among children. (Despite this, in a recent study in Great Britain, it was noted that one in twenty mothers - particularly lone mothers on income support - actually went without food to meet the needs of their children. (Social Policy Unit, 1997).)

Overall, in Australia, UK and Europe, in Canada, Scandinavia and USA, there are clearly signs of greater acceptance of child-bearing outside marriage and of different forms of relationship other than 'conventional' marriage. Additionally, even the traditionally strong Catholic countries have for the most part made the process of divorce easier and less likely to carry stigma. There are also many studies of cohabitation (as opposed to marriage) which show that cohabiting couples do not view the 'permanence' of their relationship as in any way different from those who have a marriage contract. Indeed in Sweden and Denmark there is ample evidence from a series of studies to show that cohabiting couples often marry after a period of time. As Liljestrom remarked some years ago, In many countries, "Marriage has changed from a societal institution to a personal relationship." (Liljestrom, 1987) Giddens refered to this as 'coupledom' in the 1999 BBC Reith Lectures.

How might one explain some of these trends and what are the implications for us as professional carers and educators.? One might assert the following: (the evidence is varied but fairly secure and 'universally applicable' to the richer countries of the world)

1. Longer life expectancy has prolonged the possibility of being in a relationship for a very long time. Among other things this means that as people grow and change they may find that increasingly intolerable incompatibilities emerge. Moreover, people are encouraged to stay fitter, sexually active and younger looking; all of which can affect adult perceptions in later life. Re-training and re-education are encouraged and these too can change perspectives, attitudes and perhaps necessitate a change of location.

2. Employed and employable women are more inclined to react unfavourably to bad marriages. There is evidence that women sue for divorce at something like three times the rate of men. Satisfaction in marriage, satisfaction in bed are no longer things merely hinted at. These aspects are discussed openly in many modern magazines (eg Cosmopolitan), in newspapers and on television. Boorish, demanding, lazy men are more likely to be portrayed for what they are: selfish, unimaginative, or just plain lazy!

3. Increasingly women are being taken into the work force, not for 'extra money', but as essential elements in a diverse economy. They access jobs in service industries, but also in social work, education, technology and medicine. (Something over 90% of adult Danish women are in the work force. Harms, 1997) There are parts of Canada, USA, UK where proportionally more women are employed than men.; and this is especially true in geographical areas where the employment of unskilled male labour has markedly declined. There is some evidence, too, that the bottom cadres of secondary high school performers are dominated by boys, rather than girls; and this has implications for education systems and for social behaviour and employability. In the UK graduate women are less likely to be unemployed six months after graduation than are the corresponding cohort of men. Such changes may alter the 'power relationship' in a way unpalatable to either sex. Among other things it will deprive a certain number of young men of any part in the culture where they can claim usefulness,

reliability and 'goodness of fit'. This in turn leads to breakdown in social cohesion and feelings of anomie and rejection.
Moreover, many former 'role-specific' tasks are no longer thought generally appropriate, though I should point out that there is plenty of evidence that women still perform the majority of household tasks, even when in full-time employment. Also, one should in no way assume that women are in equal positions of power. In a BBC broadcast (10th December, 1997) it was stated that , in the UK, women held only 2.5% of top managerial posts.

4. In the European Union as a whole (similar figures for Canada, Australia and USA), the average 'working' woman is back at work (either full or part-time) within approximately one year of the birth of her child. Thus, almost every child now needs some provision early on in life, especially if there are no siblings or 'maiden aunts', grandparents or relations available. To exaggerate and make the point one might classify every such child as essentially only and lonely.

5. Mobility and geographical separation have become almost a way of life (especially in countries such as Canada and Australia, where families will move three-thousand miles to change jobs and leave grandparents and other members of the family behind). Economic systems now demand 'flexibility' from workers as almost a routine commitment to full employment; and flexibility is an economic-rationalist term for moving people in and out of jobs at will and when operations and organisations are 'down-sized', altered, or 'realigned' to fit the increasingly global nature of corporations.

6. As alluded to earlier, in the majority of the countries considered, the size of the family has reduced drastically. (eg in England, from about six children in 1900 to about 1.9 children in 1997. But average figures are misleading and war and changing economic circumstances seem to cause major shifts or perturbations in the number and patterns of live births. Within OECD countries as a whole there has also been a substantial drop in infant mortality, which to some extent offsets the drop in the birth-rate.) Currently, in the northern countries of the European Union, the average number of children per adult couple is now well below two; similarly in Australia; and markedly so in Japan. However, migrant groups and socio-economic status cause some variations in the overall figures, with a tendency for families to be somewhat larger as you move down the socio-economic scale..

7. Throughout any discussion on human development, we should constantly be aware that human institutions are 'socially constructed', invested with importance that often relies on tradition and hearsay, on values and upon custom. Their reality is sometimes contained more in the ideology than the substance. Terms like 'family' and 'childhood' are invested with much drawn from the mores of the time. Consequently, it is important to recall that childhood itself is a constantly 'moving target' . It will mean different things in different groups at different times and in different contexts (vide Tudge, Shanahan and Valsiner, 1997). Moreover, adults define childhood from the vantage point of power and old age. They may therefore be out-of-date and inappropriate in what they think they perceive. (Harms and Gammage, 1998); and the media have become especially potent in the debate in almost every country. 'The pen may not be mightier than the machine gun, but the televised image almost certainly is!! Children have little real political power, except perhaps in Scandinavia, where their rights are taken more seriously than elsewhere, even being enshrined in part in the Swedish Education Act.

8. Whilst this summary is concentrated upon the children of the richer nations of OECD, at the end of the 20th century the majority of the world's children can

be legitimately classed as 'poor': and poverty results in poor living conditions, chronic disease and death - and in some countries - excessive exploitation and long hours of child labour. The richer countries are not always that superior, either, since, though poverty is defined as relative to the average income within a country, recent UNICEF reports have clearly indicted USA, Canada, Australia and the UK as nations still displaying surprising inequalities in respect of care and provision of their young. (particularly in respect of the original indigenous populations) Indeed it is said that about 25% of British children under ten years are living below the poverty line. (Hewlett, 1993; CERI, 1995; Gammage, 1997). Rich countries may well contribute to child exploitation creating what has been called recently 'corporate luxury versus corporate poverty'. Media exploitation and modeling of toys and fashion commitments are major aspects of this. We should note too that there has been a tendency for big conglomerates to have some of their products made by children from the third world; eg the Nike Corporation . (Bigelow, 1997)

9. Closely related to 8. above is the notion of 'social capital'. These are those features and resources which lie within the experience and the possibilities on offer by the family itself; the norms, the social network, the opportunities and interpersonal relationships which contribute to a child's development. As is well documented (vide Coleman, 1991, or Silburn et al 1996), the effectiveness of these elements of life is considerably weakened by poverty. Poverty itself often becomes cyclic and all measures of cognitive performance and health are systemicly related to such poverty. (vide McCain and Mustard, 1999)

10. If one looks to both 'developed' and 'developing' countries one is immediately aware that what one might term the subjective and interpersonal burden is still one largely carried by women. The so-called objective interests (which tend to be aligned with power and money) are still for the most part the province of men. (See the work of the ICRW, Washington). Men frequently define the political, and hence the social and family arena; and especially any of the professional aspects associated with medicine, education and social work. This is particularly true in respect of policy-making. (For instance, the debates about abortion, and to some extent that on divorce, in EIRE have been largely controlled, if not conducted, by men; the debates about schooling and curriculum are likewise similarly affected., being largely the domains of men in public service.)

Prime constraints

If one moves the ecological perspective closer in to the child, one can chart the salient influential structures which help or inhibit as set out in APPENDIX 1. (NB No judgement on ranking is implied in this speculative outline of 'structures which inhibit'.)

No one would deny that the child clearly brings a cluster of inherited features to this world of ours. Some psychologists think that even certain traits (like irritability) may well be inherited.(Silva, op cit.) Whatever the case, many researchers have pointed out that learning begins at birth (if not before), that children are tuned to imitate and absorb in a frighteningly fast manner. The acceleration of neuron-synapse connections is immense and the learning acomplished as a result, particularly in respect of language, is clearly pre-programmed such that in normal children much of their basic learning is complete before they ever attend primary school. Indeed, Reiner was reported (Kappan, May, 1997) as asking the pertinent question in the USA, 'why does the money only 'kick in' after most of the learning is complete?' We now know that the very architecture of the brain is more plastic, more responsive than was previously

thought, that how a child responds is a direct reflection of the social, emotional and cognitive experiences of those early years. Whilst such plasticity is heavily mediated by the genetic background, our increasing knowledge has changed the perceived emphases in child development. We now know that there are vital 'windows' of opportunity in early learning that may be lost or seriously limited if not appropriately capitalised on in the first years of life. The adolescent's brain is probably only about half as active as that of the one-year old. All this makes sense to an experienced early years teacher and does indeed correlate well with their common practices and asumptions over the last three decades. Yet many policy-makers seem ignorant of the current knowledge and go on applying out-dated policies in desperate attempts to see learning focussed on their concerns and developed in the later years. In effect our resources are mis-applied and, in many countries, economic input into 16 year olds (in terms of school facilities and resources) is between ten and a hundred times that applied to two year olds; a classic example of what criminologists and psychiatrists would see as 'shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted'!

The prime facilitators of learning, or, if you like, the elements of 'social capital' looked at more closely, are family, (including siblings if any), the media (even three year olds in England watch upwards of 20 hours per week), peers and pre-school,/care group/carer. It is not to be assumed that any of these is necessarily benign in its influences on the growing child. But if one takes the perspective stated earlier of 'only and lonely', then it becomes clear that each of our children may experience many more socialising influences than might have been the case a generation or so ago. Indeed, in one study reported in Red Deer (Alberta) 1995, research in Ontario suggested that children of about three had already typically experienced about 12 or 13 caretakers. Moreover, they had not necessarily had any forewarning of pending change, since mother had to accommodate to the 'normal' carer being ill, or perhaps a grandparent not coping, or a change of location or a modification to expense. Indeed a feature of many children's lives now must surely be the haphazard and multiple nature of their caring and consequent modelling experiences; unless they are lucky enough to be born into very secure circumstances, or into a country, such as Finland or Denmark, where provision from birth is seen as a public responsibility and taken seriously!

The principle in part espoused by Bowlby and many others (for example by Elizabeth Newson in her lectures in Nottingham) is that parents, if they are 'good', offer what might be termed as unreasonable care, that is, that parents are committed over and above what is reasonable to expect. They are, as a rule, on the child's side in a way which it is difficult for a professional to be. The parent nearly always sees the swan, not the goose!! Yet, as Tizard and Rees pointed out some years ago. In an ideal world the professional early childhood worker is free to plan her interactions so that the parenting impulses necessary for really good work can be brought into play at the appropriate time. (Tizard and Rees, 1975) Too much bureaucracy stultifies such judgement. It often prevents children's care outside the family from becoming 'unreasonable' in the important way that Newson meant. This is problem we have to address in an era of increasing bureaucracy and over-reliance on intruments of accountability. It is certainly important to acknowledge as we increasingly blur the lines and responsibilities between professional 'care' and professional 'education'.

Surprisingly, children are generally least safe in their own homes and most safe in school, nursery, pre-school or care. Whilst many of us are aware that the

streets may no longer be the ideal location for play and we have, perhaps, been alerted to certain sorts of abuse which has taken place in institutions, few of us seem to be aware that homes are often the most unsafe environments and that sometimes parents are the most subtle and devious of abusers! It is generally not considered ethical to remove children from their parents' care, unless there are signs of crushing neglect. Even then bureaucracy and the legitimate 'need to be certain' usually demand such a weight of evidence that in some terrible cases the child has been dead before intervention can be achieved. (There are several well-documented and notorious cases in Australia, Europe and North America.). Whilst poor parenting is not a correlate of poverty, certain things like extreme youth or psychological inadequacy do seem to be. (Hudson and Ineichen, 1994; Karoly, et al 1998) Under such circumstances intervention, or supplementary support structures which include help, group support and advice are surely features which a modern society might well want to ensure. Some noted research, intervention and action projects exist in this respect. Two examples are the PEEP Project (Peers Early Education Project) at Oxford, England, which works with all children born in a certain part of Oxford and recruits the parents from the time of the birth of the child. It has a prime aim of providing a better environment for literacy and self esteem. (Roberts, 1997) and the Bright Futures Project at Peoria, Illinois, USA, which involves creche facilities, parenting 'lessons' and also attempts to ensure better skill training (for eventual jobs) for parents without employment prospects. (Bradley University) There are many more throughout the world. (vide Karoly et al, op cit. These authors review the impact of interventions throughout the United States, showing how investment pays handsomely, though that its 'long-term' nature can be daunting to policy-makers and politicians interested in 'quick fix' solutions.) Many interventions focus not merely on the combinations of health, parenting conditions (eg poverty) and education, but also on the belief that parenting is not necessarily a 'natural' skill in this complex urbanised world of ours, that parents can be lonely and insecure, that a good early start for children in terms of understanding play, talk and social-emotional development can be extremely beneficial for the rest of life in ways which will pre-dispose the child to benefit from later schooling. Such schemes do not replace good pre-school care and education; they supplement them by emphasising that the child is a learner from birth and that some parents are fully aware how best to support this.

Of prime importance nowadays are the media. Their socialising power is immense. We all operate nowadays in a context of values expressed by them. The ubiquitous nature of the US culture is everywhere to be demonstrated. Such contexts often generate messages of greater salience than does home itself (or pre-school or care); and frequently those messages are presented in packages of such sophistication, attraction and slickness that no mere parent or carer can counter the fashion or the thought. As early as the 1970s both Illich and Reimer were concerned by the domination of American life by technology. They asked the question about who might profit from it and whether the mores thus ensured by its domination were desirable or appropriate. (Reimer, 1971) More recently, Saachi and Saachi estimated that British children influenced û31 billion worth of consumer sales! (BBC Broadcast, Dec 15th, 1997) A common thread throughout this debate (also echoed repeatedly in talks by Chomsky) has been the likelihood of a 'common denominator' being profit and poor taste. Such views still concern those worried by the impact of TV and video violence on children. We know that children as young as three years watch up to twenty hours of TV per week; we know that video systems are all pervasive and often used to 'amuse' or 'mind' the child when the parent is harrassed, pre-occupied or even absent, that children (and adolescents) can become inured to 'amusing violence', whether on TV or in the amusement arcade. The character in South Park called Kenny is regularly abused and even killed for the delectation and

delight of an avowedly four to eight-year old audience. We know how common it is nowadays for "The Rambo family of images (to form) part of a complex cultural reality." (Grixti,,1989, p180) We are also well aware that, with a few notable exceptions, the media are in a unique position to cultivate basic assumptions about the nature of society, to provide sterotypes of almost lasting endurance in which, for instance, women may well be demeaned, violence applauded or subtly affirmed and status inevitably assigned largely to men or to wealth. (vide Burn, 1996) The images are very seductive and flow from near birth (or can do) into the child's mind. I believe Chomsky, in his London lecture, 1996, referred to this as 'manufacturing the illusions of consent'. The teaching/learning possibilites of all the media are well-recognised and may be used wisely. The possibilities of simulation have been of significant advantage to many sorts of skill training, from lazer surgery to flying aircraft. It may be, however, that the forces of laisser-faire capitalism (and of the lowest common denominator in taste?) are not the best ways to ensure a tranquil future for our children. (vide Zigler, Kagan and Hall, 1996)

Humankind is undoubtedly social. Most of our learning is social. Indeed in extremis it is hard to identify learning that is not, in some part, socially constructed. We know that the baby is a good imitator of its carer and seeks actively to interact with him or her. It is therefore very important that every child has lots of rich social experience from other children. Learning to share, to copy, to communicate are all essential elements of our survival. Such elements also enrich our lives immeasurably. This means our children need appropriate, warm social interaction fairly soon on in life. They benefit from it enormously. It is the stuff of early learning, to accommodate, to manage oneself, to negotiate, to learn to trust and predict. The obverse is that, whereas once psychologists seemed to write of the peer group as though it were a phenomenon of adolescence, now they note its salience to even the very young (ably supported no doubt by the influence of TV). Moreover, manufacturers know how powerfully fashion and social norms can be, even for three-year olds. They are fully aware that 'trainers' and toys may be best exploited if 'every one' in the group talks of them. In short, we now recognise the power of the group for attitude formation in even the very young. This complicates a whole lot of interactions and learning. It makes disentangling nature and nurture even more difficult; it offers intriguing glimpses into sex-role behaviour; it underscores the wisdom of feminist-post structuralism, because it gives us insight into how adult relationships are in part formed from a 'system' of discourse which may be embedded in the life of the very young. (and I am grateful to Glenda MacNaughton of the University of Melbourne for supplying me with some vivid insights into this.)

Where does all this leave the child and the family, or care and education? Where does it leave us in terms of the growth of love? It surely means the following, with its 'good' implications and its 'bad' ones.

1. We have to recognise that care and education are interwoven to such an extent that it no longer makes sense to see them as anything but thoroughly interdependent. We need to deploy the same energy and zeal for early childhood provision that our forefathers brought to the establishment of elementary education. As argued elsewhere (Harms and Gammage, op cit), this societal 'need' is at least as important as other major national issues, like banking or defence. These children are not just our intellectual and economic capital. Indeed, to view them as solely that demeans the very notion of childhood, devalues our essential position as custodians of the young and defenceless. In some respects children are the last great disenfranchised; and this allows concepts of human development as 'becoming' useful, rather than 'being' as they are. It dangerously plays into the hands of instrumental, 'ends justify means'

approaches to childhood and to care and schooling. These are not merely little economic investments waiting to mature. They are bundles of attitudes and feelings which, more than knowledge of maths or technology, will shape the whole future of our society and possibly of our planet. The evidence that love, respect and responsibility are learned early is overwhelming. The evidence that there are members of our societies who are at risk, crippled by lack of the former, not necessarily through any fault of their own, is well-documented. These are the social time-bombs of the 21st century. They will not be ameliorated by disenfranchising women, making marriage an immutable institution or insisting on larger families. Is it that we suffer from 'mural dyslexia', as someone once called it, that we can't see the real writing on the wall? Increasingly our children will need good institutions from birth. Some families will need support and advice. Some parents will want to stay at home initially with their newborn children. Within any institutions we provide, however, must be care and love and learning of the highest order. Our taxes must be directed to really generous and loving provision and support. Males especially will have to see the vitality and substance of the argument. Our professionals will need to be of both sexes, well-trained, and frequently given oppportunities for further learning. They will need to be professionally responsible, but also given room for their own judgement, not anxiously 'hedged in' by facile or over-bureaucratic notions of accountability, nor by slick assumptions that play is bad for children or that this or that curriculum is the only appropriate way to a successful society. There is no quick fix!.

2. Parallel with the provision of good institutions must go effective parental support. This means supporting parents at home (as in some of the Scandinavian and French systems). It means providing support systems where there are known risks (as in 'deprived' inner-city or rural areas, or as in the two examples given earlier.) It implies sensitivity and respect for different perspectives and it means that the effects of poverty should not constantly be glossed over, ignored, or assigned to a system of blame. No matter who else is to blame, the children clearly are not! To neglect inadequacy of parenting is to establish a minefield of societal breakdown in the future.
Yet, within all this are real dangers. Loving and socialising our children is a frightening prospect if it were to be entirely institutionalised. How do we ensure consistency of love? Does that come solely from professionals? How do we provide that 'unreasonable care' deemed so essential in good parenting? Who is going to be on the child's side? Who will cuddle that child and delight in her reponses, her laughter, her burgeoning knowledge that the world is a good place? These are the challenges for our society, for policy makers, for reformers, for those that care about human warmth, love and concern and who know it to be the best bulwark against an unknown future. None of this is easy; and to provide inadequate, haphazard or unloving institutions would be to fall into the very abyss outlined by Bowlby. There is much sensitivity to this already in Scandinavia. (vide Harms, op cit.)

Lastly, we should recall, as OECD do.
"The leaders of single parent families are usually women and the poverty that can exist in such circumstances is therefore largely a feminine issue. Women work, often of necessity and with the expectation that they will be able to continue their working lives as soon as their children can be adequately cared for outside the home - an expectation engendered and supported by equity in education. The care of young children is, then, a pressing issue. The signal importance of the early years has been demonstrated....." (Evans, 1995, p 140).

Bowlby believed in the central importance of helping families. In terms of broad psychological theory, his work may have been in limited contexts, contexts

undreamt of then, but he has not been discredited. Our children need love and care. They need stimulation and consistency, predictability, not turbulence. It is the question which won't go away. No-one advocates that love and care of children should only take place in large groups, (least of all Bowlby). Nowadays we can surely recognise the importance of support from good quality staff and from ratios of adult to child which ensure the sensitivity and match of the professional decision which intervenes, which goes far beyond that of mere 'minding'.

The challenge for us all, therefore, is to ensure the melding of care and education into a secure profession. This is not about special pleading for money and high status. It is about the way that we can best provide the child care and the growth of love and intellect, of responsibility and commitment that ensure a humane and just society. Time is not on our side. We have to persuade lots of male policy-makers, among other things. We must do it now, but we have to do it in ways which reflect the essential messages from social science, from medicine, from neuro-science, law and from education, since these are the 'objective' things to which men may be more likely to respond. This is an aspect which challenges our ability to advocate, to marshal argument and to employ theory and empirical finding to good effect. Such challenges are about deep issues, about the balance between autonomy, mutuality and responsibility, about what it is to be a sentient human being. "They penetrate to the heart of the question of equality in the family, in regards to emotional and erotic equality, and in regards to an equal responsibility for the care of generational relationships." (Liljestrom, op cit, p 26)

"The better the care and stimulation a child receives, the greater the benefit - for the national economy as well as the child. The world is finally recognising that child's rights to education, growth and development - physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral - cannot be met without a comprehensive approach to serving their needs from birth." (Bellamy, 1999)

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